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Factories without Smoke

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By Chris Cherry



Chen Jun

Tianjin to Shahe Village, Henan

They are China's most precious economic asset: migrant workers. Each year, millions upon millions untie themselves from the rhythms of rural life to chase down a future in the prestige cities and sudden boomtowns of the eastern and southern coasts. In doing so, they begin a dramatic journey from farmer to worker; one marked by a profound shift from cultivating land they own, to producing goods they don't. But few will be allowed to transform completely. Oft belittled for their unsophisticated ways, to urbanites they are forever "waidiren" — outside people. Most will be marked by their speech the moment they open their mouths.

On the factories and construction sites where they will find work they are considered lower still. Here migrants are merely human capital, valued for their sweat and energy — the raw materials of capitalist growth. As anonymous as lumps of coal, their sheer numbers only act to deepen their insignificance; if one decides to revert from worker back to farmer, more will

inevitably arrive to fill the vacancy. But such a throwaway quality is also what makes them of unique value to the nation. Over three decades of growth and development, it is they who have supplied China with its competitive edge — a miraculous, low cost, infinite resource. Chinese newspapers even like to celebrate them as such with a heroic communist sobriquet: 不冒烟的工厂, or “factories without smoke”.

This is the beginning of a series of photographs that tries to return a modicum of identity to these people. It will be a set of portraits taken at various train stations across the country — the most obvious place to locate a transient population, and what seemed a fitting backdrop for a people in flux. Subjects are either on their way to cities, or are returning home to their villages. Often, candid postures make it easy to guess at which. After the click of the camera shutter, I conducted brief interviews, during which I was repeatedly reminded that these are men and women who have been dealt hard hands in life. But what could I really know of that? I decided only to take a note of their names, and their individual journeys — to try and etch a few humble lines of migration onto an imposing map. It seemed appropriate. Each of these has surely made a mark on the rise of a great nation.

Chris Cherry is a photographer loosely based in Beijing.